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The researcher as a negotiator – exploring collaborative professional development projects with teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the role of the researcher in facilitating collaborative professional development (CPD) projects with teachers in Finland. The article sheds light on the complex role of the researcher promoting professional development in educational sites through action research. The educational sites vary from individual classrooms to small schools and municipalities. The analysis builds on the creation of a communicative space in the form of a Teacher Talk group for researchers engaged in different CPD projects. The creation of sustainable arenas for communication is needed, not only at the educational sites among practitioners, but also among the researchers engaged in different CPD projects. Through our continuous communication and reflections and with help of practice theory we were able to grasp the meanings of the professional development work and our role as researchers at the intersection of action research, university and school. We found the complex researcher role to mainly be that of a negotiator concerning cultural-discursive, material-economic and socio-political arrangements.

Keywords: researcher role, action research, collaborative professional development, practice theory, Teacher Talk group

Introduction

The role of a researcher in professional development projects is demanding and complex, having often been discussed in different interactive research approaches, such as action research, collaborative action research and participatory action research. When discussing professional development today, the concept continuing professional development (CPD) is preferred over previously used concepts like in-service training, in-service education or staff development. According to Villegas-Reimers (2003, 11–12), CPD is “a long-term process that includes regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development in the profession”. However, for the purpose of this article, we would like to characterise professional development as both continuing *and* collaborative. By this, we want to emphasise that teachers come together, collaboratively develop their teaching practice

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and implement new initiatives together with researchers. This is in line with research on school improvement that stresses the value of more collegial and collaborative forms of professional development, where the researcher is responsible for both the process and outcomes, but in dialogue and collaboration with the participants (Erickson, Minnes Brandes, Mitchell and Mitchell 2005; Fullan and Hargreaves 2013; Lendahls Rosendahl and Rönnerman 2006). This is in contrast to the traditional positivistic view of the researcher as distanced and objective, not to be engaged in the research process.

Action research does not aim at changing others ‘out there’, but has an orientation towards initiating change together with others, who are not seen as subjects of research but as partners or even as co-researchers (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 1). CPD projects are now placed in a new evaluation-based policy culture in which authorities aim to engage researchers in educational sites to promote teachers’ professional development, and in which traditional forms of in-service training are replaced by collaboration and action research (e.g. Groundwater-Smith *et al.* 2012; Hardy 2012).

However, the extended role of the researcher is not easy to accomplish and grasp since every research project is unique, with its own preconditions and constraints. The literature provides us with some insights into the different roles that can be taken on when handling the tensions and dilemmas between researchers’ aims and participants’ needs. Lendahls Rosendahl and Rönnerman (2006) focus on different expectations, the questioning of researchers’ legitimacy and weaknesses in establishing mutual understanding. Huzzard, Ahlberg and Ekman (2010, 293) consider the action researcher to be “an active constructor of the discourse shaping the collaboration” rather than “a neutral discursive gatekeeper in collaborative development projects” because the researcher acts as “a mediator” between both professionals and organisations. Yet they acknowledge that the participants involved in the development process might not be used to this new role of the researcher. They might expect the researcher to come with advice and provide answers concerning which measures to take, rather than working to empower the practitioners to collaboratively find solutions. This is also our experience from our work among teachers, which made us curious to consider our roles to a larger extent.

The purpose of this article is to explore the researcher’s role in a number of different cases of CPD projects with teachers in Finland through the creation of a communicative space in the form of a professional Teacher Talk group involving teacher educators as researchers (Hardy 2010, 133–135; Smith, Salo and Grootenboer 2010). For this purpose, a communicative space can be defined as moments of deliberative and democratic human interaction focused on issues or problems opened up for discussion with the aim of mutual understanding and consensus (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014). Through this process of meaning-making of our own experiences and by drawing on the theory of practice

architectures (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) for conceptualising our understanding, we were able to enhance our knowledge of the researcher's role. This is essential as a better understanding of our role as researcher can help us further support teachers' sustainable professional development processes. Next, we will further elaborate on the theoretical framework of practice theory before introducing the methodological points of departure and our findings.

Practice architectures

In this article, we draw on the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) because it enables us to relate to and understand meaning-making and knowledge as shared collaborative processes (Nicolini 2013, 2–5). Using the theory of practice architectures, CPD in a school setting can be described as a *social practice*, a specific kind of cooperative human activity where characteristic arrangements of actions and activities (*doings*) are understandable in terms of arrangements of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (*sayings*), and where the participants involved are distributed in characteristic arrangements of relationships (*relatings*). In a practice such as professional development, sayings, doings and relatings hang together in an identifiable manner in a larger project with an overarching purpose (Kemmis et al. 2014).

When in this article we discuss collaborative forms of professional development, we do so through five different cases of CPD projects, each with slightly different aims (see the Appendix). These projects are constituted within specific conditions and arrangements of practice architectures. They are enabled and constrained by *cultural-discursive arrangements* (which shape the language used in the practice, or 'sayings' in semantic space), *material-economic arrangements* (which shape the actions and activities of the practice, 'doings' in physical space-time) and *socio-political arrangements* (which shape how people relate to each other, or 'relatings' in social space). Whereas the material-economic, tangible resources and aspects of practice architectures are often quite easily identified and grasped, the socio-political and especially the cultural-discursive dimensions constituting the practices are much harder to uncover and articulate. The practices of collaborative professional development are further shaped in various ways by a multitude of interconnecting practices, within ecologies of practices, consisting of educational leadership and administration, curriculum development, teacher education and educational research and evaluation (Kemmis et al. 2014, 43–54; Kemmis and Heikkinen 2012).

Practices are also interconnected with and take place in social *sites*. Site is the arena or broader setting, a type of tightly coupled context for social phenomena (Schatzki 2005). Site ontology assumes that social life, such as professional development in a school setting, is inherently tied to the various educational contexts and practices in which it transpires. In the case of professional development and action research, sites, especially local ones, both enable and constrain the intentions being

formulated outside the site. Development is a matter of interpreting and adapting to the local circumstances, listening to the (many) voices of the sites. More concretely, both CPD and action research are dependent on insiders' views of the site(s), and the practices upon which the site(s) are constructed. Professional development depends on teachers and school leaders inhabiting the sites at hand, and especially on their engagement in reflecting on and developing their professional practices, both individually and collaboratively. This article will examine the researcher's role in CPD projects through the lens of practice architectures.

Methodology

Action research and communicative space

As a participatory and collaborative practice, action research provides one way of enabling change in educational sites in a sustainable manner as it simultaneously builds on local knowledge of the site and nurtures agency. In our professional development projects among teachers, we conceive of action research as both *for* democracy, that is, realising a democratic public sphere, and *as* democracy, that is, the way it is conducted through dialogue and collaboration (Carr 2013). We relate to democracy in education as the citizens' possibility and obligation to enter public spheres, and act collaboratively and in dialogue within various kinds of communicative spaces (Biesta 2003).

Crucial to the understanding of action research as a democratic, dialogic and collaborative practice is the opening up and sustaining of *communicative spaces*. Communicative spaces have so far been discussed within participatory action research with reference to the Habermasian conceptualisation of communicative action (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Communicative spaces refer to deliberate interaction and communication in which experiences are allowed and encouraged to be formulated and expressed, mutually recognised, considered and shared, as well as explored, reflected on and negotiated. This is to be done in an authentic and respectful manner, emancipating and empowering participants in a communicative space to affect and improve, transform the circumstances and conditions in which they function. Communicative spaces are to be constructed and sustained beyond technical and practical action. They are characterised by collective and collaborative inquiry into and interpretation of both the cognitive and the emotional aspects of, for example, professional experiences at hand. Consequently, the world as well as human actions appear as more comprehensible. Communicative spaces rely on authenticity, informality, respect and trust, and are nurtured when participants are present and prepared to listen in order to promote perspective taking and learning from one another (Bodorkós and Pataki 2009, 314–315; Hyland 2009, 336–337; Kemmis 2006).

In Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005, 296) conceptualisation, communicative spaces foster mutual inquiry with the aim of reaching "intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding of a situation, unforced consensus about what to do". Relationships characterised by participation and mutuality are to result in a collaborative sense of agency and legitimacy. These form a platform for the participants to act collaboratively and engage themselves in researching on and improving the practices at hand. In contrast to this harmonious way of depicting communicative spaces, Gayá Wicks and Reason (2009, 258–259) look at them as delicate, liminal and dynamic places, as well as moments for the lifeworld to confront with the system, or agents to confront the culture and structure. In this view, rather than being balanced and restful places, communicative spaces are constantly changing, offering unforeseen possibilities and unpredictable challenges. Opening up for communicative space can be both paradoxical and contradictory. In order to become a safe place for the participants, it requires that boundaries are given and that a sense of purpose is provided. Often, there is a need to confront conflicting understandings of participation, as well as varying expressions of the need and character of, for example, leadership practices. Newton and Goodman (2009, 308) maintain that "the value and test of communicative space is the willingness of participants to enter into affective exchange and move from feelings about each to 'thinking together'".

Teacher Talk

This article is a result of extended collaboration and communication between us researchers engaged in different CPD projects among Swedish-medium schools in Finland. We started our collaboration aimed at collegial reflection on our own individual professional experiences as researchers in different CPD projects. Several of us researchers have a professional background as teachers, with on-site work experience. The educational, pedagogical and instructional practices to be developed took place at three interconnected and overlapping educational sites: in classrooms, in particular schools and in local, regional and national groups of educational professionals.

The focus and aim of our five cases of CPD projects differed from each other as follows:

1. creating new in-service education that meets the professional development needs of teachers and principals in sparsely populated areas and small schools (*The teacher in the small school – Development of in-service education*, Salute 1);
2. developing classroom practices for a more communicative approach to language teaching in Finnish (*Communicative Finnish*, CF);
3. finding strategies for supporting the development of the school language in all subjects (*School Language Strategies*, SLS);

4. promoting new teachers' professional development and well-being (*Peer-group mentoring*, PGM); and
5. creating collegial support for developing leadership practice on site (Local Leadership Praxis, LLP).

All five projects were established independently of each other. Four of the projects were initiated from the outside and one together with the researcher and local authorities. All five projects contained elements characteristic of action research, i.e. planning, acting, observing, reflecting (Schmuck 2006). As in all action research projects, we documented the process using, for example, interviews, questionnaires and research diaries. However, working methods, tools for studying the professional practices, and meetings varied somewhat between the projects (see the Appendix). With these variations we were able to adjust the approaches to professional development and action research to the educational sites under study.

This process firstly resulted in a book chapter (Forsman *et al.* 2014) focusing on site-based professional development and gaining a deeper understanding of the prerequisites of site-based education development by discussing four of the projects. As we found our situation and our role as researcher to be utterly complex and challenging, we went on to further explore and gain a better understanding of our researcher role in collaborative professional development projects with teachers by creating a communicative space in the form of a Teacher Talk group (cf. Hardy 2010, 133–135; Smith, Salo and Grootenboer 2010).

We made a commitment in an initial, informal meeting to come together to discuss our action research work more systematically. Thus, the meetings of the Teacher Talk group arose out of informal discussions between us researchers, all of whom knew one each other well from previous individual and collaborative work at the Faculty of Education in which we worked. The most experienced action researcher among us organised the meetings. We met regularly in the group for two years, with the purpose of sharing our professional and personal experiences.

The discussions of the Teacher Talk group were open-ended in nature, and revolved around the broad theme of the researcher role and of being and becoming action researchers. Discussions during each meeting were guided by the perspectives of different members of the group. Through dialogue as a meaning-making process, we were able to increase our understanding of our researcher role. As we found ourselves at a confluence of practice architectures of research, university and school, we were also able to reconstruct these architectures via discussions and reflection (Hardy 2010, 133–135; Smith, Salo and Grootenboer 2010). Coming together in a community of researchers thus enabled mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoires of practice. In keeping with Habermas' (1996) call for communicative action, the collaborative process of inquiry involved a dialogic exchange between us as researchers engaged in and interested in understanding

action research and the researcher role in an open manner. The discussions were based on a substantial level of trust already established from previous work and associations (cf. Hardy 2010).

The data from the Teacher Talk group consist of note-taking, pro memoria (PMs), e-mail communication and summaries of note-takings from the meetings. These, in turn, are based on the data (i.e. interviews, questionnaires and research diaries) from the different action research projects. The study followed general ethical standards approved in the scientific communities (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2012).

Findings

The data are analysed from the perspective of the theory of practice architectures and its constituting three arrangements. The role of researcher is examined and interpreted as a negotiator concerning the cultural-discursive arrangements, the material-economic arrangements and the socio-political arrangements. Thus, the concept of negotiator signifies that the researcher has been engaged collaboratively with teachers in achieving agreement on different levels of the projects. The findings presented below are accompanied with concrete examples from some of the projects (cf. the Appendix).

The researcher as a negotiator of cultural-discursive arrangements

Through dialogue as a meaning-making process, as researchers in the Teacher Talk group we were able to increase our understanding of the researcher role when negotiating the cultural-discursive arrangements of our projects. This negotiation entails inspiring and motivating participants, promoting understanding and meaning-making of the activities as well as of the language used (cf. Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008). We found that an important prerequisite for successful and sustainable professional development is, first of all, voluntary participation that relies on participants' authentic interest. When initiating a project, it is essential that the teachers are invited to engage in decisions considering the areas and the schedule of their professional development. In the initial phase of a CPD project, the role of the researcher is therefore largely to inspire and motivate the project initiative, as well as to pay serious consideration to the counter-arguments teachers rely on when reflecting on change and reforms (Terhart 2013). For the process to be successful, there is also a need for support and encouragement from the responsible organisation engaged in the development work, particularly in the form of commitment from school leaders to provide time and space for reflection and meaning-making. In cases where the participation is not voluntary, the initial interest in the purpose and content of the CPD project is bound to vary. This can partly be reflected in the way teachers are committed to their work. For example, in one of our projects, less willing

staff either did not see much cause for concern or, at the other extreme, had already more or less given up on a situation they no longer thought they could affect.

Despite occasional challenges, an outsider such as a researcher with an authentic and professional interest in teachers' tasks always seemed to be welcomed and highly needed. Here, the researcher might serve as a catalyst. For example, the Communicative Finnish project (CF project, see the Appendix) with the Finnish language teachers began by mapping the teachers' experiences of problems and their needs for support regarding their own professional development. The professional challenges were attributed to the students' lack of motivation or competence in the school subject, as well as to the negative attitudes of the parents, while none of the teachers highlighted needs concerning the development of classroom teaching practices and their own professional competence. Therefore, an important but challenging task for the researcher, especially at the beginning of the CPD work, is to find ways of exploring together with the participants possible areas that can be addressed, including the development of the teachers' own professional practices.

Based on our experiences discussed in the Teacher Talk group, we learned that reading literature can be a helpful means for supporting enhanced professional reflection among participants in CPD projects. Another way is through the documentation of professional activities, for example in the form of diaries. The challenge often lies in the teachers' workload, which makes it challenging to add on such extra activities. In the CF project the teachers read research literature on teachers' language teaching practices in Finnish. As an example, they read a study, which shows that students are very seldom provided with opportunities to use Finnish in oral communication situations in the classroom. This reading, and the ensuing discussions with the researcher, helped the teachers reflect on whether their own students communicate enough in the classroom and, as a result, contributed to raising the teachers' awareness of their own classroom teaching practices. In addition, the researcher made on-site observations in the classroom and provided feedback on the ongoing work, followed by reflective discussions on the classroom practices. This outsider's view helped the process even further by supporting and motivating the teachers to go forward with a more specific focus on the areas that needed to be developed.

In the Teacher Talk group we also explored our mutual experience that the constant time pressures in schools understandably create a need for the teachers, when they finally have the opportunity to sit down together, to express and ventilate their experiences, to point out and explicate the challenges characterising their everyday professional practice. Sometimes these discussions were more focused on the agenda set for the CPD work, sometimes less. In the Peer group mentoring project (see the Appendix), the mentor group acted as a forum for such much needed collective reflection. As one participant expressed, *"to be able to put into words, formulate and 'think out loud' about your own work for a period of time"* often

helped teachers to distance themselves from their work and enabled problem-solving. The whole mentor group participated in problem-solving while simultaneously providing the new teacher with keys to personal reflection, during the meetings as well as in between meetings. Another example from the mentor group meetings is the realisation of the importance of being heard by others. Many of the new teachers had experienced that few colleagues in the workplace have the possibility to listen to them, whereas the mentor group provided them with this much needed space: *“As the mentor group meetings involve us discussing, I also feel that we listen to each other in a different way than you are able to in the teachers’ staff room, where the atmosphere is often stressful”*.

However well-needed spontaneous and unstructured discussions are also among the teachers, a project always has time constraints of its own and set aims to be fulfilled, meaning that occasionally the researcher may have to take responsibility for initiating the structure. This entails systematising the discourse and supporting the conceptualisations of teachers’ experiences and discussions. Consequently, one challenging role and task of the researcher is to act as a negotiator of the cultural-discursive arrangements of a professional development collaboration.

The researcher as a negotiator of material-economic arrangements

As mentioned, participation in CPD projects relies on authentic interest and the teachers are invited to engage themselves in decisions regarding the areas of the development work and the schedule of the professional development. However, the prerequisites for the professional development activities are important and so is ensuring that they are well anchored in the everyday practices of the site at hand. This entails identifying the needs at sites, as well as adjusting and adapting macro strategies to the site-based needs. An important finding concerning the role of the researcher is that the researcher needs to be involved from the very beginning together with the responsible organisation, school leaders and the teachers in the negotiations ensuring that tangible support is made available. Thus, another role of the researcher is to be a negotiator regarding the material-economic arrangements (cf. Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008). The negotiations about tangible support mainly concern resources needed to free up time and space for the CPD activities, which might include costs of substitute teachers, as well as money for travel costs, technical equipment and so on. This is a core issue for legitimising the collaborations between teachers, as well as between researchers and teachers, and local authorities and employers.

Further, we found that some teachers gave voice to concerns and frustrations which indicate they were trying to fulfil the needs of the project, seemingly without experiencing any additional benefit or sense of commitment to the developmental work on their own part. Such reactions can often be attributed to time constraints, a

seemingly constant challenge for developmental work in schools. However, the projects offered time and space for reflections, which many teachers found essential and meaningful. The following example comes from the Peer group mentoring project: *“In my own school, I often don’t have the time to talk that much with my colleagues. I have tried to ask my colleagues, but everyone has their own agenda and do not have the time nor the energy to help”*. Thus, the mentoring group meetings provide the teachers with a welcome break during a stressful workday at school. The projects can also enhance better use of time: *“I realise that I have learnt to save time since this autumn term and I do not feel as stressed any more. I figured out that I need to learn how to prioritise, and that it doesn’t work in the long run to spend three hours or more per night working”*.

Through dialogue and comparison between projects in the Teacher Talk group, we found that the required resources and necessary commitments were not given enough consideration in the initial negotiations for all projects, and as a result the professional development work process of some participants was negatively affected. We conclude from this that possible practical obstacles, such as time constraints, scheduling and provision for required equipment (e.g. laptops for enabling online meetings), need to be taken care of at the outset to ensure the involvement of all participants. Based on our individual experiences discussed in the Teacher Talk group, the negotiations with regard to aims, foci (e.g. oral activities in the classroom), the use of working methods (e.g. on-site observation by the researcher and network gatherings), tools for studying the professional practice (e.g. observation schemes and log books), and the resources made available could be documented from the very beginning in a contract signed by all participants (teachers, researchers and school leaders). Thus, the researcher needs to partake in the process of negotiating favourable material-economic arrangements. This is done in relation to both the participants and their organisations.

The researcher as a negotiator of socio-political arrangements

The role of the researcher is also to be a negotiator of the socio-political arrangements, i.e., the relationships, social activities and power dimensions between the participating teachers, researchers and organisational representatives involved (cf. Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008). According to our common understanding and reflections, the researcher can be seen as an initiator of different forms of meetings: organising the meetings, initiating discussions, listening and reflecting upon experiences and providing feedback on the ongoing work. For example, as a consequence of the fact that the development work in the Communicative Finnish project (see the Appendix) was based on individual participation at the local school level, the network meetings, where the teachers had the possibility to discuss different challenges in their practices with colleagues from other schools, were

highly appreciated. In the Salute project (see the Appendix), the teachers also expressed the importance of being engaged in both structured sessions led by a researcher and more informal discussions. They also found it important to share time over dinners or leisure time, such as enjoying a canoe safari in the vicinity of the school of one of the participants. This highlights the importance of balancing formal and informal meetings to promote relations between participants.

Based on our individual experiences and discussions in the Teacher Talk group, our finding concerning how to enhance sustainability in CPD entails agreeing on the socio-political arrangements of the endeavour (cf. the previously suggested contract regarding material-economic arrangements). This may entail that the participants discuss and agree on five important values as they did in the Salute project: (a) a willingness to share, encourage and support; (b) courage, risk-taking and openness; (c) appreciation of learning; (d) considering every participant as important and able to contribute their professional experience; and (e) a willingness to overcome obstacles and problems. These values are in line with previous research focusing on how the participation in virtual networks can empower participants (cf. Forsman et al. 2014, 123; Jyrkiäinen 2007; Niemi 2002).

Even if we find teachers to be fully-fledged professionals, able to act autonomously and professionally within classrooms, we can also note how some teachers developed a strong dependency on the researcher when it came to professional practices outside classrooms. Ambitions of CPD projects to provide ownership or develop agency are not always easy to meet. This is particularly the case of undertakings initiated from the outside when they are done without giving sufficient consideration to socio-political arrangements like power relations and individual points of view, and which thus fail to fully engage participants. The fact that some teachers in the School Language Strategies project (see the Appendix) asked “*What else do you want us to do?*” or “*What should the final strategies look like?*”, rather than proactively opting for solutions that they wished for at their own site, is probably more to be interpreted as a lack of engagement in a professional development undertaking initiated from the outside than a sign of trust and reliance. There were also examples of teachers perceiving researchers as some kind of figureheads or totems, whose presence was important even at times when the researcher had no specific task (e.g. when an outside expert was responsible for the programme during meetings). Consequently, the role of the researcher is also to take part as a negotiator of the socio-political arrangements not only in the initial stages of the project but throughout the whole process.

Discussion and conclusions

In our individual CPD projects, we have been occupied with the challenge of how to reconstruct traditional and instrumentalist in-service training into sustainable and collaborative site-based education development, i.e. changing the practices of teachers’ professional development (Lendahls Rosendahl and Rönnerman 2006).

This ambition can be further motivated by a recent study of the state of art considering teachers' professional development in Finland which shows that teachers' interest as well as participation in continuing professional development is fading (Taajamo, Puhakka and Välijärvi 2014). The suggestion is to develop new practices based on partnerships and networking between universities and schools, researchers and teachers.

At times, we researchers felt lost in the practice and practice architectures of the educational sites we were involved in. Our way of tackling these challenges was to explore them within a professional community of researchers that we called a Teacher Talk group. The purpose of this article was to explore and build on our experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of the researcher's role in collaborative professional development work in the light of the theory of practice architectures.

Within the individual CPD projects, the spaces created for collaborative professional development were turned, at least initially, into opportunities for consolidating existing ways of acting on and making meaning out of everyday professional experiences. Although we separate and discuss different types of arrangements for analytical purposes in this article, this exemplifies how the cultural-discursive (sayings), socio-political (relatings) and material-economic (doings) arrangements hang together, affect each other, and shape the prerequisites for as well as the realisation of collaborative professional development. As a consequence, the role of the researcher can be conceptualised as that of a negotiator regarding different arrangements. Depending on the specific arrangements, the role of a negotiator then takes on varying and multifaceted forms.

Through our shared experiences from different CPD projects, we identify the need for a different kind of support that enables continued and collaborative professional development activities. One conclusion is that, in order to facilitate collaborative professional development, the researcher needs to contribute fully and continuously to the process at different levels where the cultural-discursive, material-economic and socio-political arrangements are negotiated. This means that the researcher needs to negotiate at an organisational level with school leaders and principals, and at a practitioner-researcher level with teachers.

Despite differences with regard to the initiatives, objectives and scopes of our respective development projects, the collaborative manner of realising professional development seems to give rise to very similar ways of 'professional behaving and acting', due to the overarching practice architectures shaping educational sites. These are ultimately guided by policies and affected by economic decisions on a macro level that local sites are affected by and need to find different ways of navigating among (cf. Kemmis *et al.* 2014). To promote continuous learning, the creation of sustainable arenas for communication is crucial. This is not only true in the educational sites among practitioners, but also among researchers engaged in

different professional development projects: Sharing and reflecting on our experiences in our Teacher Talk group shed light not just on the actual needs of the sites at hand, but also gave us valuable and informative insights into the similarities and differences of our projects. By opening up a communicative space in a Teacher Talk group and through continuous communication and reflection building on practice theory (Kemmis et al. 2014), we were able to grasp some of the meanings of professional development work and our role as researchers at the intersection of action research, university and school. Still, further work in the field is needed, in particular in relation to how to support the opening up of communicative space for all participants in CPD contexts, as well as how to concretely configure and support the ensuing work in such spaces.

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APPENDIX: Overview of the five professional development projects

Project	Initiative	Focus – aim	Working methods
<i>The teacher in the small school – Development of in-service education (Salute 1)</i>	National Board of Education, Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University	To create new in-service education that meets the professional development needs of teachers and principals in sparsely populated areas and small schools	Reflective inquiry and facilitation in dialogue with the participants, successively empowered to plan and arrange the activities
<i>Communicative Finnish (CF)</i>	Faculty of Education approached voluntary teachers in Finnish as a second language	To develop classroom practices for a more communicative language teaching in Finnish	Researcher-teacher-discussions of on-site observations on Finnish lessons and regional networks for supporting individual professional development
<i>School Language Strategies (SLS)</i>	National Board of Education approached school leaders	To find strategies for supporting the development of the school language in all subjects	Schools to plan for, try out and document strategies, preferably in small groups, according to local needs
<i>Peer-group mentoring (PGM)</i>	Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture	To promote new teachers' professional development and well-being	Support through peer-group mentoring (groups of 4–10 teachers), arranged on a municipality level
<i>Local Leadership Praxis (LLP)</i>	Negotiated together with the researcher and local authorities	Collegial support for developing leadership practices on site	Group gatherings and development projects for supporting individual/collaborative development